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ABSTRACT

A teacher of Black American literature may be overwhelmed by the amount of material that should be covered. Black American literature has origins in African, European, American Indian, and Black American features. Students should be able to read works of Black American literature that show how other people feel. A complete course can give students the opportunity to gain a knowledge of Black culture and the roots of the Black American, instilling a sense of pride in Black students. As White students learn about the evils that their ancestors committed, they need to feel the teacher's care and respect for White students, and need to be able to discuss their feelings without fear of reprisals. Literature anthologies and thematic books should include Black American authors. Special training in Black American literature is a must for all English teachers today. Black American literature may be taught in a class that emphasizes such themes of human nature as myth, social protest, or ghetto life. It may be presented in genre classes such as Black American Fiction or Black American Drama. Black American literature may be presented in general genre classes along with non-Black American literature of the same genre. It may be presented according to historical period, major literary trend, and in introductory courses. Teachers may have the class engage in free discussions of the literature and the issues it raises. Teachers and students must refine their sensibility and open their minds to different ways of thinking. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SG)

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VARIETIES OF RELEVANT APPROACHES FOR TEACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE 1990s

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VARIETIES OF RELEVANT APPROACHES FOR TEACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE 1990s

Overwhelmed by the amount of material and information that should and almost must be covered and discussed in a given course, the teacher of Black American Literature finds himself/herself in more of a tight squeeze situation that many other kinds of teachers. In order that one may see why there is so much information that needs to be imparted and taught to the Black American Literature student, it is necessary that I define the cope of Black American Literature which is often called Black Literature, African-American Literature or Negro Literature.

In spite of the term that is used to designate the literature of black Americans, one finds that the literature has outstanding relevance with fitness and suitable requirements that are applied to any of the literature of any of the world's other peoples. Some scholars frequently say that they can not judge Black American Literature by the same standards or criteria that they use to judge the other world literature; yet, examination of Black American Literature will reveal that this literature has the same universal qualities that most other world literatures adhere to. It must be noted, however, that many contemporary black American writers (mainly black poets and dramatists) have attempted to shape their own uniqueness in what they call a Black Aesthetic with some new, rather than universal themes, styles, models, and images. This idea of uniqueness of Black American Literature is an idea that is expressed in the literary criticism of some outstanding black

American literary critics.[1] Yet all Black American Literature does not fall into the realm of uniqueness (as in the specific cases of the works of Phillis Wheatley, Countee Cullen and Frank Yerby) with distinct black features and may, hence, be called literature with universal qualities that are common to all of the world's peoples.

One must recognize that black American culture and, hence, Black American Literature has origins in African, several European, American Indian, and black American features with many new inventions which were needed for survival in the New World and for expressing the black American experience (Folk Tradition of African-American Literature). One must further recognize that Black American Literature is influenced by African aesthetic ideals which differ from those of Europe. The literature has many elements of the black experience in America, an experience that was not shared by most white Americans. However, many black American writers have been influenced by European literary trends and have had many of the same experiences as all American writers.

If Black American Literature deviates in so many respects from other forms of world literature, why then does it further have relevance for both black and white students? Yes, why cover or teach it at all in the classroom? There are many good and valid reasons why a course in Black American Literature will be suitable for, and have relevance and values for all students. Instead of

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[1]Addison Gayle, Jr., The Black Aesthetic (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972)

emphasis upon "art for art's sake," the black and the white teacher of Black American Literature might through his/her teaching aid his/her students in understanding and gaining insights into themselves and other people to a much greater degree.

What should be the nature of the course content chosen by either the black or the white teacher of Black American Literature? Very often black and white teachers differ as to what is relevant for inclusion in the Black American Literature class since they have different experiences and backgrounds and since there is so much material to choose from. All teachers should try to select Black American Literature works that show basic desires, concerns, and human needs felt by both blacks and whites.

Students should be able to read Black American Literature works that show how other people feel. These works give students a better understanding of what things they should believe about other people and reasons why they should believe in these things. Students need to read Black American Literature works that give intellectual as well as imaginative apprehensions of another person's condition or state of mind without their actively experiencing the feelings of the condition. This enhances black students' self-images. Some white students will recognize that a black writer is giving an example of their own experiences and feelings. The teachers may begin with books or literary works about black people that have similar backgrounds, values, and social classes as those found in the class.

A complete and comprehensive Black American Literature class

can give students the opportunity to gain a knowledge of black culture and the roots of the black American. This study can instill a sense of pride in black students. Misconceptions about black people and the ability to relate to black people may be gained by white students. A course in Black American Literature can give a complete understanding of the treatment imposed upon blacks in America, namely, facts about American Negro slavery, Jim Crow laws, and contemporary institutional racism. How the teacher deals with the results of the students' learning about racism, discrimination, and other forms of repression is very important and requires much thought.

As the white students learn about the evils that their ancestors have committed, they need to feel the teacher's respect and care for white students. They also need to be able to discuss their feelings without fear of reprisal. It is best to alternate literary works with striking racial and emotional overtones and hatred with black American literary works which show people combating racism or depicting positive aspects of black American culture. The Black American Literature course should give whites a feeling of empathy toward blacks (intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feeling or attitude of another person) who have experienced rage, anger, oppression, racism and injustice.

Since there is so much material to cover if one is to be comprehensive, the teacher must give a fair representation of African-American Literature (started in 1746). How then should

these black literary works be presented in various classes? Of course, all general literature anthologies should include representative black American authors, and teachers should attempt to use them in their courses. Literature books that are thematic in nature should also include black American writers; and all American literature anthologies should include appropriate black American writers in periods, trends, types, and genres that are appropriate for courses in American Literature. Before the black or the white teacher attempts to teach Black American Literature, he/she should have some special training in the literature. This is a must for all English teachers today. No English teacher's training is complete until he/she has had some training in Black American Literature.

After one has received adequate training, how should he/she teach his class in Black American Literature? There are several different ways that Black American Literature may be offered in the classroom. It may be offered in the literature class which emphasizes themes of human nature and living, such as myth, legend, folklore, social protest, ghetto life, the black American experience, racism, the American dream, alienation, identity crisis, etc. It may be presented in the Black American genre classes such as Black American Fiction, Black American Poetry, and Black American Drama.

Black American Biography and Autobiography are undoubtedly the most penetrating approaches for a genre course concentration, for such a course can give insights into personal and cultural contact

between the European and his/her society and the descendants of Africa. It is a traumatic experience to be a black man in America, and this fact makes black American biography and autobiography most interesting.

Black American Poetry began with anonymous folk tradition literature of work songs and then folk lyrics created by the group. This black poetry is uniquely associated with religious ceremony, music and dance, and social protest and arose spontaneously among the black American slaves. Black American poetry is written in both the traditional and the conventional European fashion (such as the sonnet) and is uniquely created; other black American poetry is African derived syncopation with rhyming, rich melody, and dialectal language of the Oral Folk Tradition; still other black American poetry is creative poetry of the new contemporary nature and has vivid new meter, rhyme, figurative language, new poetic themes, idioms, diction, and images. The outstanding black American poetry writers run from Phillis Wheatley, Paul L. Dunbar, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Don Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Dudley Randall, and Sonya Sanchez.

Black American Drama has been hampered by high costs of production and by the questional tactics of an audience who seeks amusement and distraction by commercialism. This puritanical moralism of American life has had its effect upon the production of black American drama. For the most part blacks have not been able

to produce plays that have been highly productive in America; however, a genre course in black American drama that deals with the black American's experience can be a valuable introduction into the art of the theater and can show the changes, values, and actions of American society.

Beginning in the 18th century and continuing into the 19th and the 20th centuries, black American characters were ridiculed in farces written and most often acted by white actors in black faces. It was not until the middle of the 18th century that black actors, producers and playwrights were active. Black American dramatists such as Hall Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman since 1920 down to the more recent contemporary black American playwrights such as Owen Dodson, Douglas Ward Turner, Ossie Davis, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry (a playwright, who in 1959 produced about 500 productions of A Raisin in the Sun on Broadway), Imamu Armiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Ed Bullins have written significant plays which deal sensitively and imaginatively with black American experiences in a racist society.

Black American literature besides being taught in a black American literature genre class may be presented in general genre classes along with Anglo or non-black American literature of the same genre such as the novel, poetry, short story, and drama. It may be presented in period format concerning and pertaining to the various historical periods presented in complete selective chronological year order sequence of Black American Literature, such as "The Homeland in Africa," "American Negro Plantation

Slavery," "The Civil War and Reconstruction Era," "Accommodation and Protest," "The Harlem Renaissance," "Integration versus Black Nationalism," "Black Revolt," and "Contemporary Black American Literature."

Black American Literature may be presented in periods in the format of dealing with only one period in a class, such as Colonial Black American Literature, Black American Literature of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, Harlem Renaissance, Contemporary Black American Literature, Black American Literature in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. It may be presented in the format of the coverage of a single major black American writer's complete works, such as the literary works of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Richard Wright. Black American Literature may be presented in the form of a general major theme or literary trend of American literature such as Realism or Naturalism. It may be used in a class devoted to the focus upon and the examination of black styles and trends such as the Black Aesthetic, Black Folk Tradition Literature, Black Arts Movement, Slave Narrative or Slave Autobiography, Black Polemical Writings, New Black Contemporary Poets, or The Black American Literary Idiom. It may be used as reading and discussion material for an English composition or writing class. Black American Literature may be used in an introduction to literature course with presentations of the Black American Novel, Black American Poetry, Black American Short Stories, or Black American Drama. Finally, it may be used in the general introductory literature courses where the basic genres are

introduced and discussed, such as Introduction to Poetry, the Novel, the Short Story, or Drama.

Finally, teachers in various courses in which Black American Literature is used may have the class engage in free class discussions of the literature and the issues it raises. Student-led reports, panel discussions and debates may be conducted. Students may write short, original critical papers as well as longer investigative research papers. Students are encouraged to make comparisons and constantly to review and to evaluate other reading and writing. It is suggested that films, exhibits, audio-visual materials be used. It is also suggested that teachers form their own course objectives.

Teachers and students of black American writing must first rid themselves of pressures, patronizing, and prejudices. The teachers must examine their own motives and be faithful and honest to the basic critical standards of Black American Literature. As they maintain intellectual honesty and critical insight, the teachers and the students of Black American Literature must refine their sensibility and open their minds to different ways of thinking.

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